DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 022 IR 021 750

AUTHOR	Haimovic, Gila
TITLE	Keeping It Simple: The Case for E-Mail.
PUB DATE	2002-06-00
NOTE	6p.; In: ED-MEDIA 2002 World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications. Proceedings (14th, Denver, Colorado, June 24-29, 2002); see IR 021 687.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), P.O. Box 3728, Norfolk, VA 23514. Tel: 757-623-7588; e-mail: info@aace.org; Web site: http://www.aace.org/DL/.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Computer Assisted Instruction; Computer Uses in Education; *Distance Education; *English Instruction; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Instructional Design; Nontraditional Education; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS	*Open University (Israel)

ABSTRACT

The Open University of Israel (OUI) is a distance education institution that offers over 250 computer-mediated courses through the Internet. All OUI students must pass an English reading comprehension exemption exam or take the University's English reading comprehension courses. Because reading instruction differs from content instruction, different considerations need to affect how best to utilize the computer when planning computer-mediated communication (CMC) delivered reading courses. The distance courses in English reading comprehension are transmitted via e-mail, rather than the Internet. The purpose of this paper is to recommend this "primitive" option, and to explain why it suits courses of this kind. There is a tendency to move on to ever-more impressive modern technologies, and constantly seek new ones. To avoid falling into the trap that Gabi Salomon referred to as the "technological tail wiggling the educational dog", the e-mail option was decided on. (Author)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G.H. Marks

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Keeping it Simple: The Case for E-Mail

Gila Haimovic
The Open University of Israel
Israel
gilaha@openu.ac.il

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 477 022

Abstract: The Open University of Israel (OUI) is a distance education institution which offers over 250 computer-mediated-courses through the Internet. All OUI students must pass an English reading comprehension exemption exam or take the University's English reading comprehension courses. Because reading instruction differs from content instruction, different considerations need to affect how best to utilize the computer when planning CMC delivered reading courses. The distance courses in English reading comprehension are transmitted via e-mail rather than the Internet. The purpose of this paper is to recommend this "primitive" option, and to explain why it suits courses of this kind. There is a tendency to move on to ever-more impressive modern technologies, and constantly seek new ones. To avoid falling into the trap that Gabi Salomon referred to as the "technological tail wiggling the educational dog", we decided on the e-mail option.

The Open University of Israel (OUI) is a distance education institution which caters to students of all ages who wish to earn an academic degree, in Israel or abroad. There are no entrance requirements, but students must live up to the University's stringent course demands, and all must pass an English reading comprehension exemption exam or take the University's English reading comprehension courses. Though the Open University offers over 250 computer-mediated-courses through the Internet, the distance courses in English reading comprehension are transmitted via e-mail. The purpose of this paper is to recommend this "primitive" option, and to explain why it suits courses of this kind.

The OUI Study Method

The OUI's teaching method is not space- or time-dependent as it is not based on a central campus where lecturers and students gather, or on an established and uniform schedule [1]. Students enroll in specific courses rather than in a faculty or department. They select the courses in their program of study from a varied and wide-ranging selection. The individual program may include a diverse array of disciplines (which in other universities belong to separate departments or faculties), or may be based on a more focused disciplinary format which resembles, to some extent, single-discipline or dual-discipline programs of study in other institutions.

Students' rate of progress is not measured in units of time (years or semesters), but rather in the number of accumulated credits. The individual rate of progress is determined by the students themselves – based on the amount of time available to them. The only constraining time-frame is the semester, as the duration of most courses is one semester of 15 weeks, and the students are required to meet the requirements of the course during the semester in which they are enrolled.

The OUI offers close to 500 courses based on scholarly or scientific works, consisting of one or more volumes written by renowned specialists in their field and produced especially for OUI students. The coursebooks are adapted to self-study: they are usually divided into units, each of which deals with a specific topic to be studied within a fixed period of time. Guiding questions are integrated into the material, as are exercises and self-assessment questions. Each course includes face-to-face components: group tutorial sessions, laboratory work or study excursions. While participation in these sessions is usually not mandatory, it is highly

IR021750

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

[1] The description of the Open University study method is based in large part on Zippy Erlich, Judith Gal-Ezer, and David Lupo, "Traditional Distance Education vs. Technology Integrated Distance Education" in *Intelligent Internet Based Teaching and Learning*, edited by R. J. Howlett and L. C. Jain to be published in 2002 by Springer-Verlag.

recommended, as the sessions contribute considerably to clarification of the study material, and also provide an opportunity to interact with other students enrolled in the course. The sessions are held at the regional study centers throughout the country.

Open University courses have traditionally taken advantage of existing technologies for enrichment. Until the early 1990s, lectures by experts were broadcast daily on Israel radio; with the advent of cable TV, television broadcasts which accompany many OUI courses have replaced the radio. Segments are aired several times a day, every day of the week. With the rapid development of information and communication technologies in the 1990s, it was clear that the integration of state-of-the-art technology into OUI courses would have a significant impact on distance teaching at the OUI.

Technology at the Open University

The main reason for integrating technologies, and the Internet in particular, into OUI courses, was to provide a virtual campus as a substitute for a real campus, to compensate students for what they miss when learning at a distance. A second objective was to take advantage of additional educational resources, beyond what the university provides. These include all public domain educational resources and digital library services, which enables students to access bibliographic and other databanks, electronic journals, computerized encyclopedias, as well as the computerized catalog of the university libraries network in Israel, from their homes. Another aim was to compensate for the lack of face-to-face tutorials for students whose nearest study center is far from their homes, or who are unable to attend tutorial sessions for various personal reasons, by providing virtual tutorials through electronic communication.

The Center for Information Technology in Distance Education (*Shoham*) was established in 1995 to help the Open University enter world-wide academic activity in the field of information technology in teaching and education. The major focus of the Center's activities is on research and development of teaching methods based on state-of-the-art information technologies and incorporating them into OUI courses.

Telem, a department within *Shoham*, specializes in computer-mediated communication (CMC). It has developed an interactive on-line learning environment on the Internet, which is part of the teaching/learning process and serves both students and faculty. Today close to 250 CMC courses are offered, with state-of-the-art technologies incorporated into course development and teaching procedures.

Interactive learning: The computerized teaching/learning environment provides for one-on-one and group interaction among all participants in the course: students, instructors course coordinators and guest lecturers. Every CMC course has its own HTML and Java-based Web site that provides interactive learning materials through electronic asynchronous communication including discussion forums, e-mail, and materials that students can download. The sites can be accessed by students in Israel or abroad through the Internet. All course sites are graphically and functionally similar, and linked to administrative information drawn directly from the OUI's central database: the course schedule and description, the course tutors and the list of students. The academic aspect of the sites includes Hebrew-based applications that were specially developed to enable the course coordinator to easily and independently update the data, without the need for any knowledge of Web programming. With this platform available and widely used at the OUI, the question arises as to why the English reading comprehension courses do not take advantage of it.

English Reading Comprehension Courses at the Open University

Reading comprehension skills in English are necessary for all students for whom English is a foreign language. Without the ability to read in English, students find that sources needed for much of their academic studies, especially in advanced courses, are not accessible to them. As a result, all Israeli universities require a minimum level of reading comprehension in English and students cannot be awarded a degree without passing an exemption exam or taking English reading comprehension courses. Since only 10% of students entering the

university come with an exemption in English, the reading comprehension courses are among the most highly populated, if not the most popular, at the OUI.

The Open University offers a series of courses in English reading comprehension for academic purposes on five levels: A (advanced); B, C (intermediate); and D, E (beginning). The courses are offered in three study formats: intensive (a semester-long course comprising 14 weekly face-to-face meetings), regular (a semester-long course comprising 7-8 bi-weekly face-to-face meetings), and computer-mediated (a semester-long course which includes 1-3 face-to-face meetings and 9 e-mail sessions, of which 7 are compulsory). Of the three formats, only the latter is a distance education format.

Most university courses are, by nature, content courses. In contrast, learning a language is a process of communication and goes well beyond learning lists of words and practicing grammar exercises. Because the classroom is a more natural environment for language use and social interaction, language courses are traditionally taught in a face-to-face (f2f) format. If we consider reading as a mode of language use, and distance education as a mode of language instruction, distance education for this particular mode of language use seems particularly appropriate. Indeed, we encounter striking parallels: the reader (when reading in "real life") and the learner (when learning to read) both function in isolation when interacting with a text. In both cases, discourse is enacted at a distance, a disassociated first person (the author or the instructor) is actively present, and no reciprocity is manifest, within the interactive context [2]. One could, therefore, argue that reading instruction and distance education are particularly well-suited. It would therefore seem logical to use the available platform for teaching reading comprehension. But because reading instruction differs from content instruction, different considerations need to affect how best to utilize the computer when planning CMC delivered reading courses.

The *Telem* course sites are designed for content instruction, and are intended to afford additional interaction among the participants and to provide technology-based learning aids that increase the effectiveness of and enjoyment from the learning process. Learning materials are based on multimedia and hypertext, and include animations, simulations, multiple-choice exams with immediate feedback; and access to databases on the Internet. These aspects are less relevant when transmitting an existing reading comprehension course via computer. Traditionally, reading comprehension programs rely entirely on pre-defined and pre-produced teaching/learning materials in which the selection and organization of the reading texts and the tasks are determined by the syllabus-writer. In a f2f teaching/learning context, the instructor, in selecting what to teach, turns the abstract syllabus into what s/he considers to be the most appropriate means to activate the learning process. Thus it is the instructor who controls and promotes the learning. In a CMC reading course, while the instructor is responsible for dividing the syllabus into sessions, arranging deadlines for task completion/submission, and making decisions for assessment and evaluation, once the course gets started, the participants take over [3]. In order to explain the choice of technology, it is necessary to briefly describe the course.

The E-Mail Format

The following description is of a B-level e-mail mediated reading course which has been implemented for the last five semesters at the Open University. The objective of the course is for students to reach the level of proficiency expected in the parallel f2f B-level course (intensive or regular formats). The students sit for the same mid-term and final examinations taken by students registered for the course in all formats.

Participants: In order to make the course manageable for the tutor, the number of participants in a group is limited to 20.

Materials: The teaching materials, which are pre-prepared and handed out to the students, comprise the following:

- A collection of reading passages consisting of articles selected on the basis of topic interest and level of difficulty, the same texts used by the rest of the students.
- Workbooks dealing with nine texts, arranged in modules according to text organization patterns (comparison/contrast, description, cause and result, argument, research) including approximately 20 questions to guide the reading process and relevant teaching points (reading strategies and linguistic features). The workbooks are similar, but not identical to the regular materials.

- A "Resource Center" which brings together all the major teaching points dealt with in all modules as a handy reference.

---

[2] I am grateful to Dr. Esther Klein-Wohl of the Open University of Israel for pointing out this parallel.

[3] This concept was proposed by Dr. Anita Pincas of the Institute of Education, University of London.

Process: The initial f2f meeting provides the students with the opportunity to get to know each other, to familiarize themselves with the structure of the course and to understand what their responsibilities are. This meeting serves as a "kick off" point for the course and its main focus is to deal with students' queries and technical problems, as well as an introduction to pre-reading activities. The students can attend two additional f2f meetings by joining regular groups near to their homes: one is held a week before the midterm examination, and another is held before the final examination. These serve to prepare the students for the exams by explaining the format of the exam and supplying a practice examination.

The rest of the course consists of asynchronous e-mail sessions. Prior to each e-mail session, students are sent a list of the questions which they are assigned. Each student is assigned 8-9 of the 20 questions which relate either to pre-reading or to close reading, as well as post-reading questions for all students. The date of submission is mandated in advance as a specific day of each week and the questions are sent out one week in advance. The weekly tasks demand active learner engagement rather than passive participation in classroom sessions. The tutor's feedback, which provides the correct answers as well as specific comments regarding language features, useful reading strategies and general and individual feedback relating to students' cognitive and metacognitive awareness, is sent out to all students within three or four days of the deadline for submission, and serves as additional English-language reading material.

Our students have reacted extremely positively to the course, and their achievements have consistently been as good as, or better than those of their peers in f2f groups. Their feedback (provided on an anonymous questionnaire filled out by all students at the end of each course) has invariably emphasized the one-on-one teaching and the close contact they enjoy with the teacher, thanks to the e-mail communication.

Why E-Mail?

In recent years, scholars in various content fields have been grappling with the question of appropriate formats for CMC. Perhaps surprisingly, among the scholars who recommend the simple e-mail format, rather than what Margaret Anderson (1997) calls "new and 'glitzy' technology", are faculty who specialize in Engineering and even in Computer Information Systems [4]. This indicates that the choice of e-mail is not necessarily related to students' assumed computer skills, nor to the technological options available, but rather to the specific needs of the course and its pedagogical context.

As we have shown, our distance education reading courses also do not utilize all the multimedia aspects of what can today be called "traditional Internet teaching" as exemplified by the *Telem* platform. In terms of pedagogy, our reading comprehension students are given the reading texts on paper, and not through the computer, because reading, and especially reading comprehension skills, are dependent in large part on back-and-forth reading, marking the text, and note-taking. Reading from paper is still considered easier than reading from a screen [5]. We also need to consider the purpose of this course. Beyond the formal requirement of English language proficiency, our goal is to enable students to read and understand the required course readings that they are assigned, some of which may be in English. These readings are usually provided to students in a printed booklet. Thus, in "real life" - for their studies - students will be reading on paper.

In terms of technical aspects, the platform utilized by *Telem* (Opus) makes it difficult to mix English and Hebrew within a single message, and students often answer reading comprehension questions in their L1. Another problem relates specifically to the *Telem* platform. After connecting to the Internet, students need to go to their course site, enter a password, and, often, wait. They then need to go into the weekly forum to find the assignment, print it out, leave the computer to do the assignment, and then repeat the process to post their assignment. Having posted their assignment, they need to check the forum to see when the feedback is posted,

and repeat the process to get the feedback. Thus students need to remember to go into the course site at least

---

[4] Interesting papers in this context are by Margaret Anderson ("An Internet-Based Asynchronous Distance Education Course") and Donna Ehrhart ("Interaction Through Electronic Mail") in the context of CIT '97, Learning with Technologies, May 27-30, 1997 (Brockport, SUNY) and Julie Sharp's paper, "E-teaching Simply with E-mail" presented at the 30th ASEE/IEEE Frontiers in Education conference, October 18-21, 2000 (Kansas City, MO).

[5] See, for example, Andrew Dillon (1992), Reading from Paper Versus Screens: A Critical Review of the Empirical Literature, *Ergonomics, 35* (10), 1297-1326 and *Designing usable electronic text: Ergonomic aspects of human information usage*, London: Taylor and Francis, 1994.

three times a week. Moreover, there are often announcements which relate to administrative aspects of the course which are often urgent messages, and students have no way of knowing that these have been posted unless they go to the course site daily.

In contrast, when the course is transmitted via e-mail, merely by opening their e-mail, which they do anyway, students receive assignments, announcements and feedback. They can post their answers in a combination of English and L1 within the same e-mail message, or send them as attachments in Word or any other word processor. Because there is no need to remember to check the site, students can be sure that they are up-to-date and have not missed anything. The simplicity of e-mail works in both directions: If the student has a problem, s/he can send a "help" message to the instructor by e-mail, and be assured of an immediate response. The price students need to pay, in terms of time on task (or, more precisely, time around task) and dealing with what is often an unwieldy system, is too high for a course that does not utilize the advantages of the course sites available at the OUI. To avoid falling into the trap that Gabi Salomon referred to as the "technological tail wiggling the educational dog,"[6] we decided (to continue with the dog metaphor) that in some cases, a mutt is better than a certified pure-bred, even if less elegant.

Technology in distance education is constantly improving and becoming more user friendly and flexible. There is a tendency to move on to ever-more impressive modern technologies, and constantly seek new options. But our objective is to teach, and we have to be careful not to lose the baby because of the bathwater. Sometimes the simplest, least sophisticated technology makes more sense than state-of-the-art.

Acknowledgements

Dr. Esther Klein-Wohl, Head of the English Unit at the Open University of Israel, introduced me to this mode of teaching, and forced me (kicking and screaming) to teach this course. In retrospect, I'm grateful to her. I am also indebted to the Research Authority of the Open University which enabled me to present this paper.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

[X] This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

[ ] This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").